

## The \$1,300 ham comes to Canada

By far the most expensive cured pig on the market arrives this month for the first time

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Later this month, when maple and other processed hams are being sold in peak numbers across the country for Easter Sunday tables, an altogether different specimen from Spain will be upping the ante — and the price point — for cured pig in Canada. By far the most expensive bit of jamón on the market, Ibérico de bellota, when it arrives this month for the first time, will retail at about \$300 per kilogram. Your average football-shaped offering from Maple Leaf Foods goes for about \$10 per kilo.

Ibérico is a prized, rare-breed pig, native to the Iberian peninsula and now exclusive to Spain. Unlike most commercial pork, the animals are pastured — free-range — and raised in woodlands called the dehesa, an ecological reserve of oaks, cork trees and conifers, where they forage for grasses, herbs and nuts. Also known as the black foot or pata negra for its commonplace dark trotters, the Ibérico is a vision of porcine perfection: rotund in a profound sense with colossal jowls, long snout, bristly black hair and tiny eyes. But the most prized part of this beauty is its Betty Grable legs, which are relatively long and thin, especially when the animal reaches its full weight of about 180 kilos. It's these gams that, through a traditional process of salting, washing, drying and aging over a period of about two years, produce the platinum-priced meat. What's more, due to a distinct genetic quirk that allows the pig's fat to permeate into the muscle mass, the hams are streaked, almost like a meaty bacon, with a silken, melt-in-the-mouth fat. A bonus for health-conscious consumers is that the fat is more than 70 per cent monounsaturated, what's known as "the good kind" of fat — a fact that has earned the Ibérico the nickname "four-legged olive trees."

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Ibérico hams come in two classifications: the standard and bellota, the premium. Bellota means acorn in Spanish, and this is what these pigs gorge on for the last few months of their year-long lives, in the process adding at least 40 kilos of heft, and generally much more, while ensuring a nutty taste to the final, mahogany-hued product. "Every day, they're eating roughly 15 to 20 lb. of acorns and putting on two pounds of body weight," explains Toronto-based importer Michael Tkaczuk of Serrano Imports. Tkaczuk has been working to bring this salty treat here for years after succeeding in 2004 with serrano, the more commonplace Spanish ham (sold at about \$60 per kilo). "I wouldn't even compare serrano with Ibérico," says John Mastroianni of Pusateri's fine food shop in Toronto, saying he finds "serrano is more like the Italian Parma ham — good, but everyday tastes."

Embutidos Fermán is Tkaczuk's source for Ibérico. The 50-year-old company has managed to capture international markets from Japan to South Korea with its vertical production that ranges from breeding through curing. Raúl Martín represents abroad the business his grandfather began. When asked what the Ibérico de bellota tastes like, he says, "It's not easy to describe, but once you have tried it, it will all come clear. Let's just say it's a party of flavours in your mouth."

Why is a bit of cured pork so expensive? The number of pigs and the acreage where they are raised are both limited, explains Martín. The time from the pig's birth to shipping the ham is generally three years, a relatively long process compared with modern hams, where it can be months from pigpen to plate, and there is a significant loss in weight — upwards of 35 per cent — that comes with the natural curing process of Ibérico hams.

At Cava, a Toronto restaurant rich in charcuterie, chef Chris McDonald serves serrano on the bone, hand-cut to order. He will do the same with the Ibérico de bellota when it arrives — as is, no need for embellishment, and preferably paired with a glass of sherry. The chef has learned the art of hand-cutting, so won't need an extra service Tkaczuk will provide with the media launch in April: a visiting master slicer from Spain who will pass along the essentials of the craft — considered essential when handling the ham.

There are orders from a handful of restaurants and stores across the country, but Tkaczuk is not entirely sure Canadians will buy the Ibérico de bellota: the first shipment is less than 100 legs. "It's not easy to sell a \$1,300 ham." Chef Martin Koupprie is more confident. With a limited supply of under-the-radar samples last summer, Koupprie put the regular Ibérico on the menu for a brief spell at Pangaea, his high-end Toronto restaurant. "I was surprised: people really knew about this product. We're ready for something like this."